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Manuel R. García

CUTTING BROCCOLI

"Rosalva," asked Leonel, "is Fresh Picked a North American company?"

"Yes, it is," she answered.

"Very good. And is Maria an employee of Fresh Picked?"

Rosalva smiled proudly. "Yes, it is."

Leonel grinned and shook his head. It wasn't going to be easy teaching Rosalva English. But he loved the challenge, and when someone like Rosalva learned it made the effort worthwhile.

Just then Julia, the chocolate-skinned secretary stuck her head through the door, flashed her dazzling smile, and made an announcement that suddenly gave him goose flesh.

"Leonel, Mr. Harris says for you to go to his office *immediately* after your class." Her face wrinkled into a puzzled frown. "He seemed mad."

It hit him like a blow between the eyes that muddled his thinking and made him stammer when he answered. "Thank you, Julia." In twelve years he'd never been *ordered* to his boss's office. If Mr. Harris wanted to see him he usually came to the classroom, thereby nullifying the fact that he *was* boss. When Mr. Harris had first been transferred to the Mexican division of Fresh Picked Foods, Leonel taught him Spanish. Over the years they'd become friends, baptizing each other's children, and sharing bottles of tequila to mourn sorrows and celebrate triumphs.

But Leonel hadn't shared all his own secrets. Was this the summons he'd dreaded? There were ten minutes left to class. He tried to concentrate, telling himself there was nothing ominous in a summons from his boss, but the feeling of alarm persisted. He considered calling class short, but decided to continue, hoping to compose himself. By the time class ended he'd convinced himself that going to the office to see what was up was preferable to torturing himself.

He stepped outdoors and was hit by the suffocating dry heat of central Mexico in May. The smell of chemical fertilizers reminded him that this plant was part of modern Mexico. He crossed from the warehouse where his classroom was to the Administration Building, but without his usual brisk walk. He suddenly felt every one of his forty-five years.

Everything about Leonel was square-built. His shoulders were broad and tight. His black mustache, mixed with gray, bisected a square face with a wide grin and strong teeth. Even his cowboy hat sat squarely on his broad head, and the black hair over his ears was also tinged with gray.

He passed one of the huge packing sheds where broccoli and cauliflower were frozen and packed to be shipped to the U.S. Their metal roofs gleamed in the reflected afternoon sun. The administration building was pastel blue inside and air-conditioned. In Mr. Harris's outer office Julie gave him her bright, toothy grin. "Hi, Leonel. I'll tell him you're here." She opened the office door to announce him. "Tell him to wait." She looked at Leonel, shrugging her shoulders, knowing he'd heard.

"You said he was mad," said Leonel.

She frowned. "He sounded mad. But he wouldn't be mad at you, you're his best friend." She sat at her desk, then said, "Please sit down, sir," in English, with a proud grin for the teacher.

He answered, "Thank you very much, Miss," and watched her return to work. Something was wrong.

He thought of another stifling hot afternoon like this one, but in the United States, in California's Salinas Valley. In the brown wooden building on Gavilan Street that served as field office for the United Farmworkers Union he'd told Elizeo, the Union's head organizer in the area, that he was going home to Mexico to visit his family. Elizeo, his best friend in those days, had brightened up at the thought. What was Elizeo doing now?

They'd been sitting behind a dusty counter in a room covered with posters, slogans, and safety regulations. "Leonel, that gives me an idea. You're from Irapuato. What if you go to work for Fresh Picked while you're there?"

The year before they'd won a contract at Fresh Picked. The company swore they couldn't afford the higher wages and benefits. They'd recently sold their California holdings and relocated to Mexico as they'd threatened—to Irapuato.

"Elizeo, they'll never hire me. You know I'm on their blacklist."

"Here, not in Mexico. They'll never guess that one of our people would follow them to Mexico to spy on them."

"I'm not a spy."

"You'll do anything that has a little excitement to it. Besides, it's not really spying. You're going back anyway. You can make a little extra money while you're there. Ask for a job. If they hire you, fine; if not, it doesn't matter. If

you find something out, maybe we can use it, if not, we don't lose anything. We tried."

"That would be something, wouldn't it? Me spying on those bastards. When I was a kid running around barefoot I never could've dreamed that someday I'd be asked to be a spy. What would I look for, and what good would it really do? Fresh Picked already left the country."

"Maybe no good at all. And they've only left the area; they still have plenty of other holdings. Someday we might organize against them again, somewhere else. If they treat their workers like dirt here, you can bet they do it in Mexico. Do they pay fair wages? How many hours do people work? What are conditions like? You know what to look for. Who knows when information like that might be useful. We've got nothing to lose. If they say no, turn around and go home. Look at it as an adventure."

Leonel had stood up from the wooden folding chair, his eyes eager and alive. "Let's do it."

The "adventure" had somehow lasted twelve years, and now here he was, sweating it out in Mr. Harris's office. And what did he have to show for twelve years of "spying"? Nothing but a bunch of yellowing scribbled notes stashed in a drawer under his shirts.

He'd been waiting about twenty minutes. "I don't know why he hasn't called you," said Julia.

"That's all right. I can wait." He wasn't looking forward to the meeting, but at the same time he wanted to have it done with.

"Leonel, a man called from the United States this week for Mr. Harris. He spoke in English very fast. I said, 'Please, speak more slowly,' and he did and I understood everything he said—well almost. He said, 'Tell Mr. Harris that he doesn't forget to call me.' I said, 'I will tell him, he won't forget,' just like in class. He said, 'Thank you very much'."

Leonel smiled despite his anxiety. Julia had had a hard time with English, but she'd stuck to it, and it was paying off. When he'd first gone to the U.S. as a *mojado*, a "wetback," he'd found he had a gift for English, and absorbed it almost as a child does. Now he spoke naturally, even using slang well, though he'd never completely lose his accent. Here in Irapuato that gift had freed him from the fields.

After moving to Mexico the company had realized it had a gold mine. They gladly paid the fifty cent an hour Mexican minimum wage, and found shipping to some parts of the U.S. cheaper than from California. With money

pouring in, they decided they could afford to buy a new image. Tired of being the “greedy exploiters,” they tried to ingratiate themselves with the community. For the price of a few balls and jerseys they sponsored soccer and basketball teams. They donated to civic and church events, as long as the company logo appeared prominently. And they got incredibly rich. They wanted their American executives to speak Spanish, and to teach their Mexican employees English. Someone mentioned Leonel, and he was moved to a classroom, part time at first, returning to the fields between classes. But now he taught full time. In fact, it had been Mr. Harris who’d taken him out of the fields for good. He hadn’t cut broccoli in many years.

“How’s your little girl, Julia?”

“Fine, she talks now. And yours?”

“The littlest one’s not so little any more. She wants me to buy her a Nintendo.”

“Do they speak English?”

“Yes, my middle one, Anita, is very quick. She learns much faster than I do.”

“She has a good teacher.”

“You keep telling people that and I’ll never have to go out in the sun and really work for my living again.”

“It’s true, and you work as hard as anyone here.”

“I know you,” Elizeo told Leonel with a sly look the night before he left. “You love doing things like this.”

“Now that it’s time, I’m excited. Can you imagine what Fresh Picked would do if they knew I was working for them in Mexico, the same person they sent their goons after?”

“I still hate that son-of-a-bitch Harris for what they did to you. I know he ordered it.”

“It’s over now. I don’t even remember the pain.” That wasn’t quite true. A year earlier, during the height of the unionizing campaign, the company brought in a tall young man in cowboy boots. He was thin as a fence post, but everyone jumped when he spoke. The new man, Gerald Harris, never took part personally in any violence, but late night beatings of union activists by company “goons” started immediately. One night three men jumped Leonel as he walked to his car in a labor camp. Two of them held him while a third stood facing him with a baseball bat. The one with the bat, the shortest of the three,

about Leonel's size, was the only one who laughed, giggled really. Leonel still winced to remember his clear eyes smiling in the moonlight as he wriggled the bat over an imaginary plate. "Well, greaser, we'll see about you," he said. Then as Leonel twisted and turned against his captors, he reached back putting his weight into it, and brought the bat crashing into Leonel's mouth. He felt no pain at first, only a dim realization that something was very wrong with his mouth. The warm, sticky feeling didn't bring it home; neither did his hand as he felt the bloody mess of a mouth. It wasn't till his tongue encountered empty spaces and sharp edges that the reality and pain took hold. He suffered a broken jaw and lost four teeth. Two other men were also attacked that night.

Such tactics, when they don't cow a victim, can create a zealot. So it had been with Leonel. That's when his career as an organizer began in earnest. When the wires were taken from his jaw, they released a powerful orator, one who could convince men to throw down their tools and walk out of the fields in the middle of a strike, who could inspire them to stand together in the face of violence and, almost as important, who could raise money and support in the cities.

"You've had quite a few *gringuitas* to help kiss away that pain since then," Elizeo said.

Leonel smiled that bashful country grin that won so many of them over. "They helped me get over the hard times."

"I've never met a man who needed more nurses, *amigo*."

What times he'd had. The beating made him a hero, with all the hero's benefits. One woman especially came to mind, a law student named Pam, a smart organizer with deep, round eyes and a seductive smile. They worked a summer as a team, and a hell of a team they made. They could read each other's minds, finish each other's sentences, and interrupt each other's conversations with just a gesture or look. Once they were assigned to an isolated section of grape orchard. They arrived about five in the morning to talk to the pickers as they came in. Then there was nothing to do till lunch, so they got in the back seat of her car to wait. She went to sleep on his shoulder, then he fell asleep. When they awoke her arms were around his chest. She looked up at him and said, simply, "This is nice."

He kissed her. She kissed him back with her whole body. In seconds their hands were under each other's shirts and up and down each other's legs. He

remembered the skimpy white bikini panties that made her slender legs so exciting as he pulled her Levis off.

"Should we be doing this on Union time?" she said, smiling and settling down into the seat.

"Let's just say it's for *la causa*."

They made love in the summer heat surrounded by miles of grape vines and the complete silence of California's Central Valley. They didn't stop till it was time to meet the workers as they came out for lunch, almost getting caught. They'd both been so high as they talked that they signed up more pickers for house meetings than ever before. He and Elizeo used to joke after that to be a good organizer you had to have good sex. What a day! He hoped Pam was a successful attorney by now, settling labor disputes as she'd dreamed. Meanwhile he sat in a sparsely furnished office in Mexico's green farmland, a field worker turned organizer turned teacher, trying to figure out what went wrong. Those pretty *gringa* coeds seemed part of another man's life, now.

"Leonel, you've been waiting an hour. Let me remind Mr. Harris you're here."

"There's no need, Julia. He knows. He must be busy."

"But you're his friend."

"Don't bother him." Leonel had a nervous lump in his stomach that felt like he'd swallowed an apple whole.

"I have some letters for him to sign anyway. I'll just take them in."

She entered the office and Leonel heard the two of them speak. When Julia came out her eyes were to the ground and she hurried to her chair. Without raising them she said, "He said he'd call you when he's ready."

So, Mr. Harris knew. How? Elizeo had long ago left the Union. The plan had just been between the two of them. As far as anyone knew he'd simply gone home on vacation and never come back.

It'd been surprisingly simple. He'd asked for a job and got it, cutting broccoli. Pay was low but he got by, barely, like in the U.S. There were no toilets in the fields so they peed between rows. Often, with mischievous grins they peed on the broccoli but the joke soon grew old, as in the States. Through an elaborate payroll scheme the men worked as self-employed contractors, not employees. So they weren't paid severance as provided by Mexican law if they were fired or laid off. A man worked till he was too slow or too old, then simply let go. But these were common practices in Mexico, hardly considered

abuses. Still Leonel recorded them all. In the U.S. farmworkers were looked down on as “stoop labor,” but in Irapuato, where steady work of any kind was scarce, Fresh Picked employees were envied and admired.

At first he’d been glad to see his mother, his family and friends. Then he got bored with the sameness of life in Irapuato. He was ready to return to the U.S. when the city offered a free computer class. Considering the use it might be with the Union, he signed up. There he met Rocio, a girl with dark skin, deep dimples and thick athletic thighs. He’d known her in primary school. She’d gone on to high school, but he wasn’t intimidated as he’d once been by “smart” girls. He’d begun to learn the measure of his own intelligence. His ideas about power for the working man were strange, but they proved his heart was good. She loved his dedication, his enthusiasm, and his handsome square-jawed smile.

He told her he had to return to the U.S., but would send for her as soon as possible. She lowered her eyes, bit her lip, nodded her head and said yes, she’d wait. After the wedding he repeated it. When his first daughter was born he started looking for a piece of land on which to build a house. By then he was teaching and making better pay.

He continued taking notes. Two men died from chemical fumes because safety regulations were routinely ignored. He took it all down. He told himself he had to return soon, but somehow that day kept getting pushed back as life with Rocio and his baby daughter became more comfortable.

For about five years Elizeo wrote, telling him how the Union was doing and urging him to keep taking notes because, “one day they may be important.” It encouraged Leonel and made him feel he hadn’t abandoned the Union altogether. Then no more letters came. He wrote to the Union and received a personal reply from César Chávez, saying that he was still remembered as one of the best organizers they’d ever had, and though he’d been dropped from the rolls, he was welcome back anytime. No one even knew what he was doing in Mexico. That had been the beauty of the plan. He knew he should go back to reinstate himself. The Union was on hard times. A recession was forcing people to work for whatever they could get. Membership was down, they were struggling to survive. Of course, if there were ever another campaign against Fresh Picked he’d go back, even if some of the fun would be gone now that he had a family to provide for. He missed the feeling of purpose and, of course, the excitement, although the news that another baby was coming made up for much of it. The ends of the pages with his

notes began to curl, so Rocio put them under his shirts to keep them flat. It wasn't till some years later that Leonel heard from Elizeo again. His friend had gotten married and opened a grocery store.

Meanwhile a tall, skinny general manager had arrived in Irapuato. Leonel was assigned to teach him Spanish. His name was Gerald Harris. He didn't remember Leonel. The friendship started because of an unusual dynamic of the classroom. Mr. Harris was a taciturn man, not given to the easy give-and-take of the workplace. As manager he intimidated people, which suited his style, and he made few friends. But in the classroom the teacher is the authority, and Mr. Harris found himself relating to Leonel as an equal. Leonel had enough experience teaching to accept the role easily. Each felt the other to have good judgment, a quality both valued. Before Leonel was fully aware of it, they were becoming friends. A weekly chess game began, usually at Leonel's house so Mr. Harris could escape his *rancho* and enjoy the noises of town. They usually ended up in a neighborhood *cantina* where they took turns buying the tequilas. The years slipped by and Mr. Harris's Mexican-born children began to study with Leonel because they were losing interest in speaking English.

Another hour passed. Julia had gone home. Finally, the office door opened and Mr. Harris stood with his hand on the knob. He was still as slender as when Leonel had first seen him and wondered how all the necessary human organs could fit inside that pencil frame. His clean-shaven face looked soft, but the muscles of his jaw were set. His gaze was piercing, level, dead serious. Even in cowboy boots he had the grace of a dancer at rest. He said, "Come in, Leonel."

Leonel sighed and stood up. At least whatever was going to happen would start now. He entered the office. Mr. Harris stepped around his desk, sat down, then indicated a seat. They'd spent many hours in these chairs discussing the ways of the world, but they were definitely employer and employee now. Mr. Harris leaned back in his upholstered chair, crossed his long fingers over his cowboy-style belt buckle, his thumbs massaging one another, his face unreadable, except for his eyes which merely seemed inquisitive.

"You've worked for Fresh Picked before, haven't you, Leonel?"

"Only briefly, in California."

"Why did you work for us so briefly?"

Leonel was about to answer with a platitude, as if he didn't suspect what was coming, but thought better of it. Mr. Harris hated evasiveness almost as much as he hated weakness. "I was fired for union organizing."

"You were fired. Apparently we keep better records than you thought because it came up in a report I received."

Leonel's old defiance flared up. He wanted to say, "If your records are so great, why'd it take you twelve years to catch me? I could've burned the place down a dozen times by now, once a year. You people still aren't that good. I can still beat you." That's what he wanted to say, but he saw Rocio's trusting smile and his daughters in pretty dresses, and could only manage, "I didn't think it would matter here."

"So you never mentioned it."

"No one ever asked."

"You never mentioned it to me."

"I was afraid to."

"What did you think I'd do?"

"I don't know. I didn't want to take the chance."

"I've been doing a little investigating, Leonel. This came up when we merged our files with the main computer in the States. It said that one of our employees had worked for us in California. When I found out who, I had them check further. I couldn't believe it."

Leonel said nothing. Mr. Harris went on. "Let me ask you something. Why would one of the UFW's most effective organizers, a man who, when he was fired by Fresh Picked, didn't even look for another job, but just kept organizing; why would such a man suddenly drop everything to go to Mexico and work for that same company? Can you tell me, Leonel?"

"I came to see my family. I met Rocio and decided to stay."

"You were already working here when you met her. I know because you've told me the story enough times. I've heard about the entire courtship."

Leonel could've bitten his tongue off for being so transparent. Of course he knew, just as Leonel remembered when Mr. Harris's future wife agreed to marry him. Didn't they drink a whole bottle of tequila to celebrate? "I wanted to earn a little money while I was here, that's all. I never would've stayed if I hadn't met Rocio."

"And you had no problems working for Fresh Picked again, a man of your pride?"

"This is a different country; things are different."

"Are they better?"

"They're different."

"How?"

"There we were illegal, the owners called the *migra* instead of paying us. All we could do was run like scared children. Here we are in our own country; there is no *migra*. There we had to live on the owner's land, in company houses, far from any stores, so we had to buy at the owner's store. They charged whatever they wanted. They didn't even tell us how much, they just took it from our pay. Here I can live where I want and buy where I want. And here nobody calls me 'greaser'." Leonel was beginning to feel the old thrill of the orator. Maybe he'd talk himself out of this after all.

"Nice speech, Leonel. We were in California at the same time, weren't we?"

"Yes."

"What did you think when I arrived here?"

"You walked right behind me down the rows. I stooped lower and turned my face away, but you didn't recognize me."

"Were you involved in the violence there?"

"Yes, I was beaten with a baseball bat. My jaw was broken and I lost four teeth."

"Don't you feel any bitterness about that?"

Good question, thought Leonel. Not about the bitterness. That had disappeared years ago. But how had this man become his friend; this man he should hate? He'd thought about it often. The attraction was easy to understand. They were both intelligent men who enjoyed each other's company. Simple as that. Each saw in the other a strong, dependable man, a man he'd like to have at his back if trouble came, someone who could be counted on to take care of his end. Mr. Harris had no reason *not* to befriend Leonel. But Leonel? More than once he'd called Mr. Harris the oppressor, a mad dog who attacked blindly to serve his masters, and worse. He'd yelled it at rallies to cheering crowds, and through a bullhorn to workers in the fields. Mr. Harris hadn't changed, hadn't pretended to. So he, Leonel, must have. How?

His ideals were still the same. It was easy enough to say he had a family to think of and could no longer afford to be a revolutionary. Or that he wasn't a person to let old hatreds fester so long. While they might be true, those answers were too simplistic. They didn't explain why he'd let Mr. Harris become his best friend, or why he'd allowed himself to get into such an

unequal friendship. Mr. Harris never tried to hide the friendship and never treated Leonel as an employee. It was easy because Leonel's unique position as a teacher meant he reported directly to Mr. Harris and had no real co-workers. They were just two guys, friends, working together to teach a bunch of people a new language. And they worked well together. Mr. Harris was exacting but fair. He demanded instant compliance, letting no one waste his time. He could freeze inferiors and equals alike with a curt remark. Most employees tried to avoid having to work near him. Leonel liked a man who knew what he wanted and was so efficient they rarely had problems. But the decision to treat the friendship that way was Mr. Harris's, to be changed at his whim. Leonel had always known that if the friendship ever went sour Mr. Harris would still be the boss. He'd often wished he worked somewhere else so the tension he felt wouldn't exist. He'd be more comfortable as employee or friend. He didn't like being both.

And what about his ideals? He'd let his commitment to the Union wither, he'd let himself relax and get complacent, forgotten the possibility that he might be discovered. He'd known for a long time, as had Rocio, that he was never going back. As his commitment had decreased, his friendship with Mr. Harris had grown. Mr. Harris had become an old foe from a distant campaign. Who better than a man you truly respect to share your deepest fears and joys with? Old enemies can become friends, but only when the war is over. Maybe unknowingly, but at some point he'd made the decision that his part in the war was done. He'd never realized it before, but it seemed now that the friendship had grown at the same time, and at the same rate, as the commitment had faded.

What if there were a strike here in Irapuato? Would he take part? Yes. He'd probably become a leader. Would he really risk everything again, even his family's security, for his co-workers? Did he love them that much? The answer was yes, he would. Not only for love, but also for another chance to become a hero. He could easily see himself and Mr. Harris locking horns again in bitter combat, shedding an occasional tear for a friendship lost. He might even beat the son-of-a-bitch, too. But why was it that in all these years he'd never used his position of friendship to suggest better working conditions? What'd happened to the pride he once carried like a banner? He hadn't known it was gone till today. Maybe pride just disappeared if you didn't use it, like a runner gone fat.

Mr. Harris brought him out of his reverie. "I asked you if you had any bitterness about being beaten up with a bat."

Leonel's reply sounded inadequate as he said it. "That was long ago. I've tried to forget about it. We all do what we must to survive."

"I guess we do. I went to California to check on you."

Shocked, Leonel looked Mr. Harris in the eyes, but the thin man merely stared back as if inspecting a shipment of vegetables. Leonel blurted out, "You went to California?"

"Yes, when I got this information I couldn't believe that in all these years you hadn't said anything. So I went to check for myself, besides I hadn't been back there for a long time. Spring nights are still beautiful in the Salinas Valley." He hesitated for a second as if expecting a reply or remembering something, then continued. "Our lawyers still have some old film of you. You were one hell of a speaker." An alarm went off in Leonel's head. Something was terribly wrong. Mr. Harris was too calm. "Leonel, I've come to know you pretty well. You're one of the most honest men I've ever met. You would never have kept something that important from me for all these years if you weren't hiding something. I know it. I wondered and wondered why you never told me. I could only come up with one answer. You came to spy on us, didn't you?"

There it was, the dreaded question. Leonel was surprised he could answer so calmly. "I was curious to see how things were when I started working here, but I intended to go back. That part is true."

"And what information did you collect?"

"Nothing much. I took some notes at first, but it was nothing really."

"Were those notes worth twelve years of your life?"

"There's really nothing . . ."

Only the muscles of Mr. Harris's jaw moved as he spoke. "Don't you think I know what you've seen? Do you think I'm blind? I know you have nothing." His eyes were absolutely vacant of expression, his voice a monotone. It was maddening—and frightening—to see him so calm. Leonel almost wished the tall *gringo* would lose control and spring at him, but that would be a show of weakness. "Don't you think I know what conditions are like? You forget, I run the place. What you've seen is so trivial you'd be laughed at if you made it public in this country. And what makes you think people in the United States care about working conditions of Mexican farm workers? As long as their food is cheap they don't care if we pay you with *tortillas*. They think you're happy with some beans wrapped in a *taco*, and they certainly don't care if you're comfortable at your work. No Leonel, you have nothing. You did it

for nothing, but the price was small. You've made many friends here, and you only had to betray one."

Leonel could think only of his daughters. He'd spoiled them, but children adjust. He would explain; they'd try to understand. He'd be the one to suffer seeing them go without the things he wanted for them. Rocio would understand too, and accept it without blaming him, although she'd know the whole thing was as unnecessary as the sheets of note paper yellowing under his shirts were useless. He wished he'd told her more often how much he loved her when he didn't have to because now that's all he'd be able to give her. He wondered how long the Chevy would run; there'd be no car after this one. And he thought of the man in front of him, the man who'd once ordered him beaten bloody, the man in whose home he'd also been treated as a friend. Was it betrayal? He'd never meant to betray anyone. It had just happened. He'd think about it later. It probably didn't matter any more.

Mr. Harris still sat back twiddling his thumbs over his belt buckle. His eyes empty; only his words indicated that he'd been hurt by Leonel's actions. Leonel couldn't look at him. Mr. Harris's control infuriated him, made him want to scream out, but the words he would scream refused to come.

"So what do you think will happen to you now, Leonel?"

"I've always done my job. I've never hurt the company." His own words sounded empty, like a child caught being bad, contrite, begging not to be punished too severely. Finally he could stand his own whining no more. He stood up and yelled, "Okay, I did it. So what? It all came to nothing anyway. Now why don't you tell me what you're going to do about it, so we can both get on with our day?"

Mr. Harris looked at him with what looked like a hearty smile. "Well, I was wondering if you still had it. Do you know that in twelve years this is the first time I've seen this side of you? I think I like it."

"All right, so now you've seen it. Now, what are you going to do?"

The smile disappeared. "Sit down. I'll tell you what."

Leonel did, finally feeling on somewhat equal terms with his boss.

"I know you never hurt the company because you never saw anything that could hurt us. The only one you really injured was me, but that's the job of a Union man, isn't it? And of a spy. Ché would be proud of you." A tiny smile touched his lips, but not his eyes. "You were really something on film. Is he still your hero?"

Leonel looked right at Mr. Harris. His blood was up. But Mr. Harris didn't seem to notice. "You think you're going to be fired, don't you, Leonel? Well, you're wrong."

Leonel's look turned to surprise, studying his boss. Was it possible this man could forgive him and forget, the man he'd once called a mad dog?

"No, Leonel, I know the law. You're a regular employee. I put you on the payroll. If I fire you I have to pay you severance. With the years you have in, you'd get enough to buy that piece of land you've always wanted; maybe even the taxi you talk about once in a while. Do you think I'm going to make you a gentleman rancher?" It hadn't even occurred to Leonel, but if he were fired he'd get about a year's pay, enough to allow him to do things he couldn't otherwise do. Once again, as in chess, Mr. Harris was one step ahead of him. "You can continue working here, but you can't teach any more. As of tomorrow you cut broccoli again."

Leonel had crossed into the United States on a night as still and black as the devil's soul, through a drainpipe smelling of human excrement. He'd watched a man with insane eyes and a baseball bat take aim at his teeth. Yet suddenly, for the first time in his life, he felt real fear. He feared the long days under a scorching sun, feared for his family, feared he couldn't do it anymore. He closed his hands into fists and felt soft, sweaty palms, hands that were no longer accustomed to the feel of dirt and tools, that for years had worked with nothing tougher than an eraser.

Mr. Harris read his eyes. "Don't worry Leonel, you can do it. You're still a young man; only forty-five. You'll get used to it again. And you can keep your job as long as you like, but you'll make broccoli cutter's pay. We'll never fire you and pay you for what you did, but you'll never have another job, not as long as I'm here, and I've come to love your country. My wife and children are Mexican. I intend to die here. You'll cut broccoli every day of your life until you retire, or as long as you can, and I'll be here to watch. We'll grow old together, but not like I thought we would. If you make it you'll receive your retirement. If not, you'll cut broccoli for as long as your back allows you to stoop."

The fire in his gut disappeared and he felt a twinge of the little pain he'd been getting recently in the small of his back, the kind so common among field workers. He'd never worried much about it before. He would now if he accepted these terms. That pain would probably drive him from his job one day. He should walk now, but he had to think, and talk to Rocio. He could

work a while to gain time to make other plans. An idea hit him. Start a union! It's what he knew. Mr. Harris was right. Conditions weren't that bad by Mexican standards, but workers were overworked and underpaid. A real union could give them one thing they didn't have—hope of a better future. Like countless other Mexican workers, most Fresh Picked employees made minimum wage, barely enough to feed their families, and would make no more till they quit or were let go. A real union could set new standards for the whole country. He was the orator, the natural leader. There his daydream ended. Orator and organizer he was; leader he was not. He could take another man's dream, infuse it with life, make anything seem possible, instill courage in others because of his own. He could raise a fist and say, "We can do it. Let's move," and others would follow. But he was not the dreamer. That was the difference between Mr. Harris and him. Mr. Harris could do such things. Leonel would always be the capable and trusty lieutenant.

That's why he was afraid to walk out. He had no one to walk out for. No one to tell him he'd done the right thing, and with whom to plan the next step. He was on his own. He'd never consulted with Rocio on anything more weighty than what brand of blender to buy. She'd always tried to get him to save more money, but he'd always enjoyed spending on his family. How much did they have? Enough to live for a couple of months. Certainly not enough to start a business. What business? Taxis cost money; a permit cost as much as a car. He could probably turn part of the house into a grocery store and stock a few shelves. But that was it.

Mr. Harris pulled him out of his reverie. "If those terms don't suit you, you can leave now. The door's open. If you stop coming to work we'll drop you from the payroll for abandoning your job, like you were abandoned by the washed-up union that sent you here to spy. As far as I'm concerned, Leonel, when you can no longer stoop you'll disappear." He sat back in his chair, his elbow on the armrest, biting at his thumb and staring over his knuckles at Leonel. "Make up your mind. It's late, and I want to go home. What are you going to do?" He looked bored; just business as usual. He didn't gloat in victory, he was accustomed to winning.

Leonel stood, but couldn't leave. He couldn't just walk out. There must be some way out, something he could say. "What will happen to the classes, the students?" How sickeningly feeble it sounded. Here was the defender of the working man's rights, and that's all the fight he could muster in his own defense. No wonder Mr. Harris was throwing him out of his office.

"It's my job to worry about that. Do you think I can't replace an English teacher? You be in the fields in the morning and forget about the classes." He hesitated a while, then continued. "You know, Leonel, the workers respect you. You're a steady man, you always have been; a company man. I always knew it. Rocio knows it too. Why do you think she married you?" He paused again. "Funny, you came to spy on us and instead you helped make the company a success, whether you meant to or not. Now good night."

Leonel turned to go. He felt tired. He had to get home and think. He left the office, passed the reception area, and out into the hallway. At the end of the hall he opened the door and was hit full in the face by the onrushing heat. He was surprised it was night. Time had been standing still; it would begin again now with a vengeance. Above him the Milky Way set the sky ablaze. He looked at the stars and remembered other nights spent watching the spring-time sky. He'd felt at peace then. His most immediate problem had been the ranch he was organizing; his biggest question about the future, where his next girlfriend would appear from. What had happened to the dream of union? This wasn't how it was meant to come out. He'd always tried to do right. Where did it backfire? He smelled fertilizer and freshly cut broccoli; he heard a distant car on a country road, and the night call of songbirds. It struck him how similar this was to nights in the Salinas Valley.

Tomorrow he would be cutting broccoli. After that, who knew? He had to talk to Rocio.